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YARTS: An acronym for “liberation”

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Sheet writer Katie Vane takes the long bus to Yosemite Valley.

Three weeks ago I sat down with YARTS Transit Manager Dick Whittington to hear his pitch for the merits of YARTS. For those who might also be in the dark, Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System (YARTS) offers public transportation from Mammoth Lakes and Merced to Yosemite Valley. On the Eastside, it runs once a day, seven days a week in July and August, and once a day on weekends in June and September. But because of the late winter, YARTS is extending its daily service through Sept. 9, which means there’s more time than ever to discover a surprisingly convenient local service.

According to Whittington, YARTS offers the following:

“Connectivity between services,” for instance, allowing JMT hikers to link Eastern Sierra Transit Authority (ESTA) to YARTS to travel from Mt. Whitney to the Valley.

An alternative to driving during traffic-heavy summer months.

A relatively cheap means of entering the Valley: \$30 one way and \$20 round trip from Mammoth to Yosemite Valley, with no extra gate fees.

A different way to see Yosemite. Or, as Whittington said, “You see different views on the bus; it releases you to enjoy the ride.”

I decided to see if any of this was true for myself, and three weeks later, on Wednesday morning at 8:30 a.m., I caught the YARTS bus from the Shilo Inn to Yosemite Valley.

An important note: two weeks ago, just one week after I met with Whittington, I broke my ankle rock climbing. Thus I embarked upon this journey with crutches and a “moon boot,” and only a vague idea of what I could do on one foot in the Valley.

The day turned out to be a pleasant surprise. For one thing, the YARTS bus was comfy: a 45-foot over the road coach with a bathroom, reclining seats and air conditioning. For another, the drive really was beautiful. I’ve been to Yosemite before, but what Whittington said was true ... not having to pay attention to the gas pedal, brakes or steering wheel, I was liberated to enjoy the scenery without interruption.

The other thing Whittington was right about: people really do use YARTS to connect to other services and areas on the East and Westside. A young couple on the bus was returning to Berkeley; they’d parked their car in Tuolumne and had taken YARTS to Mammoth to relax for a few days. An older gentleman was using YARTS to “putz” around Yosemite before returning to Mammoth to catch a flight back to Seattle. He’d also hiked the John Muir Trail from the Valley to Whitney, and taken ESTA from Lone Pine to Mammoth, just as Whittington described.

The bus ride from Mammoth to Yosemite Valley isn’t short. It takes about four hours, with stops at June Lake, Lee Vining, and Tuolumne. But it certainly isn’t stressful. By the time we arrived in the Valley, I was beginning to feel ambitious. In spite of the smoke—a combination of Sequoia, Avalanche, and Hodgdon prescribed burn mingling to almost conceal Half Dome—the Valley was stunning.

I decided to hop on the Yosemite Valley Hybrid Shuttle, which picked up about two feet away from where YARTS dropped off at the Visitor’s Center, and took it one stop to the Yosemite Falls Trail. I didn’t hike the trail, but I did crutch close enough to admire the view. After that I hopped on the

shuttle again and took it to the next stop, Camp 4, legendary Yosemite climbing spot, where I watched the pros go at it and felt a little sorry for myself.

Then it was time for lunch. I got back on the shuttle, which swung by every 10 minutes, and took it to the grocery store. I grabbed some grub and found a boulder to relax on in the shade.

The highlight of the trip? When I looked up in the middle of lunch and saw a fellow one-legged crutcher crossing the sidewalk toward me. All day I’d been regarded like some kind of alien by the two-legged Yosemite brethren. Here at last was someone who understood the frustration of being in a place this beautiful without being able to walk.

His name was Aaron, he was from New Zealand, and he and his buddy had gotten into a car crash only the night before. Their sleepy driver had run the car off the road into a tree; according to Aaron, they were lucky to be alive. He’d escaped with a severely lacerated foot, now bound up in a cast, and his buddy showed off a chipped tooth.

We commiserated, describing our war wounds, until the shuttle bus arrived. Then we wished each other speedy recoveries, and Aaron and his friend got on, headed for places unknown.

I was starting to believe that buses were the easiest — and safest — way to get around the Sierra.

An hour later I wandered over to the Ansel Adams Gallery, where a kind employee let me sit on a chair near the checkout counter and page through photography books. Then somehow it was 5 p.m. and the YARTS bus was arriving to drive me back to Mammoth.

As we started up the steep, winding road toward Tuolumne, I asked Will (or “Bob, if you don’t like my driving”) how long he’d been driving this route. “I’ve been driving the Merced route for about five years now,” he said. “I’ve only done this route three times. But I like it ... I like it a lot.”

He wasn’t alone.

The bus was packed on the way back, and the ride felt a bit like the end of a school camping trip; everyone sweaty and beat, happy to let the rocking of the bus lull them to sleep. Four hours later, we arrived in Mammoth again, and I parted ways with my fellow YARTS riders. My adventure was complete.

Would I do it again? In a word, yes. It was a smooth, safe, scenic trip. Should you do it? I guess I’ll put it this way: if I can have a good time with only one functioning foot, then I think you’ll have a great time — on YARTS and in the Valley — with two.

For more information, go to www.yarts.com, or call 209.388.9589, or 877.989.2787.

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